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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRO'S SPRINT TO NATO SUMMIT

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Montenegro's government has stepped up its campaign to promote its NATO-related priorities. A round of meetings with NAC ambassadors in mid-February indicated to GoM officials that most member states have a positive view of Montenegro's progress, but some skeptics remain. The MFA admits that it has not succeeded in drawing attention to progress in civilian priorities, particularly the rule of law, despite some recent successes. The challenge for NATO will be to encourage the GoM to keep up the momentum for reforms past the April summit. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Charge met on 26 February with an official from the senior ranks of the MFA for an informal conversation on the progress of Montenegro's NATO integration efforts. The discussion focused on Montenegro's priorities in the civilian sector, primarily rule of law and public opinion (Ref A). The official also described the results of a GoM visit to NATO missions in Brussels 17-18 February, commenting that most missions seemed to have a positive view of Montenegro's progress toward NATO. He acknowledged, however, that it had been even more difficult to focus attention on Montenegro than the delegation expected.

¶3. (SBU) In addition to meeting with NATO international staff, the Montenegrins called on NAC ambassadors representing Italy, Netherlands, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Slovenia, Greece, Bulgaria, Norway, Croatia and France, along with representatives of Germany and USNATO. MFA officials also met with their counterparts at the Belgian MFA. Charge's contact mentioned that Belgium, Holland and France seemed to be least supportive during this round of meetings.

¶4. (SBU) The MFA official went on to say that the apparently positive IPAP and PARP assessments had strengthened Montenegro's hand. The assessments, he said, identified substantive progress worthy of substantive recognition by NATO. He emphasized that Montenegro has made considerably greater progress than other new aspirants and should be considered strictly on its own merits rather than as part of a bloc.

¶ 15. (SBU) The official pointed out that, in strategic terms, one of Montenegro's greatest contributions is its continuing role in building regional stability. Among the Balkan countries, he noted, Montenegro has the best relations with all of its neighbors, even with Serbia. Without elaborating, he asserted that Montenegro's relations with Serbia can improve relatively quickly. He also reiterated the GoM's readiness to establish full diplomatic relations with Kosovo soon (Ref B). In his view, it is incumbent on Montenegro to build good relationships with all its neighbors, not just for the sake of external security but to contribute to stability internally, among its various ethnic groups.

¶ 16. (SBU) Regarding Montenegro's rule of law priorities, he noted public statements by the Ministry of Justice regarding steps to finalize the new Criminal Procedure Code, as well as a planned interagency agreement to establish an organized crime task force (Ref C). He admitted that he and others in the MFA were still learning about these developments and that the MFA must do more to highlight for NATO member governments GoM actions to overhaul its criminal justice system and curb organized crime.

¶ 17. (SBU) Regarding public opinion, the official said he believes support for eventual NATO membership is increasing, perhaps to as much as 40 percent. He acknowledged that he had no new poll data to verify his claim, but commented that different polls have produced varying results - from 25 to over 50 percent support. He believes that the GoM's publicity campaign is building support among younger, urban and more educated citizens, particularly as understanding grows of the relationship between standards for NATO and EU membership. He added that the majority of Montenegrins either support NATO or remain apathetic, in the latter case because they lack knowledge about the Alliance. A small minority of hard core of pro-Serbian opponents, he said, will likely remain for the long

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term.

¶ 18. (SBU) In discussions with the DATT the same week, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) agreed on timing for the airlift of three rotations of Montenegrin infantry to participate in ISAF, beginning in November 2009. At this point, the MoD envisions these units will have a fixed-site security mission. (Note: The Minister's public comments on the potential deployment of infantry units have received scarce press coverage to date.) In addition, the MoD is considering assigning two mid-ranking officers for 12-month tours as liaison to ISAF, coordinating support for the infantry units. The MoD confirmed that a three-person medical team is expected to deploy in August after completing training.

¶ 19. (SBU) Comment: As the NATO summit draws closer, the pace of GoM efforts has increased. The lobbying campaign will culminate next week, when PM Djukanovic, accompanied by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, is scheduled to meet with the NAC. With regard to the three rule of law reforms identified as priorities last fall - enactment of a new Criminal Procedure Code, establishment of an organized crime task force, and steps to crack down on conflicts of interest (Refs D and E) -- the GoM has addressed all three, though not flawlessly, and not yet as thoroughly as we would like. It is clear that the GoM's desire for closer links with NATO (and the EU) has stimulated a wide range of actions, including progress in the USG's eleven priority areas. The challenge for us, along with our NATO allies, will be to help Montenegro keep up this momentum. End Comment.
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